

Tovolea, Tovolea, Ko Na Qai Rawata: Try and Try and You Will Achieve

Donasiano Ruru

My dear dad and mum, you are warmly remembered every day of my life. I long to share the joys of my life with you, and for you to see and cherish the fruits of your labour.

Dad, I vividly recall Saturday morning of February 1998 when I bade farewell to you for the last time as I accompanied Katarina to Canberra. She was awarded an AusAID scholarship to pursue her undergraduate studies there. Leaving you behind was not an easy decision especially as mum had passed on five years earlier. As a strong advocate of education, your consistent support and blessing were motivational for me. Today, ten years on, I am still paddling my canoe through the Tasman and Pacific seas in search of educational excellence. As I reflect on my journey, I recall pushing out to sea, which after paddling for many years, led me to the 'Land of the long White Cloud' where I am now.

My early primary school days at Savarekareka Catholic Mission School in Savusavu, Vanua Levu, were full of excitement and fun. I can recall, as a particularly memorable event, the end-of-year concert of 1971. At the concert you recounted how the little red train had tried to climb the steep mountain and was successful only after several attempts. In Fijian, you would say, "tovolea, tovolea ko na qai rawata." You told this story to remind the students of the importance of perseverance in order to attain their goals.

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regret. I only wished that I had worked harder
earlier. Then I would not have had to walk the
gravel road on that moonless night.*



Donasiano Ruru

Donasiano Ruru is from Fiji. At the time of writing this story, he is near completion of his doctoral degree in Development Studies at Victoria University of Wellington. Donasiano had earlier completed a BA and MBA at the University of the South Pacific and a Master in Development Administration from the Australian National University. He is a qualified teacher and experienced teacher trainer. His story is written as a letter to his dad and mum. It acknowledges their wisdom as leaders and the influence they have had on their son.

You had very little choice but to request a transfer closer to Suva, to enable my elder brothers and sister to attend secondary school. It was not an easy decision, yet it was the most appropriate one and a better option for our future education. For the rest of the family members, your request meant significant changes for us. We had to leave behind numerous friends and fond memories which had been nurtured over the years. For Lusua (my youngest sister) and me, the transfer meant leaving behind our birth-place which we had called home. As children, we had picked up and mastered the local dialect and the transfer to Suva was a new journey away from the comfort and warmth of our familiar Savusavu environment.

In Savusavu, I had observed that you had a special place in the wider community. You earned the respect of the people because you had time and affection for them. Even though our house was small and crowded, there was always a place for visitors especially for those who came from the far north-east of the island. You established a special relationship with the community of Tunulua, the school where you had taught previously. Some visitors would stay longer when their family members required full recovery at the Savusavu Hospital. Later they would return with considerable supplies of food and gifts as expressions of their appreciation. This practice had meant that there was always plenty of food for the people from all walks of life who frequented our home.

While visitors would bring food, you yourself were a very enthusiastic farmer. You enjoyed gardening and working in the plantation daily after school. In the weekends we, as a family, would spend even more time in the gardens. I used to enjoy being carried on your shoulders on our way home. Now I realise how tired you would have been, yet you seemed to have had enough energy to carry me home after a long day's work in the plantation. I had often looked forward to the weekends with excitement and saw our garden work as picnic outings. Although my brothers, Kele, Wani and Mika, and my sister Vilo were, at times, reluctant to go to the plantation, you always insisted that they learned to enjoy gardening. Your hard work in the gardens meant that there was always a surplus of garden produce for Mum to sell at the market. In this way, Mum's marketing was able to subsidise your meagre salary and to meet our family needs and all other social obligations.

The way we do things now has changed enormously and the challenges of our family lives today are considerable. As I reflect now on the way you brought us up, I recall how you nurtured us to be self-reliant and trustworthy. I remember well the day, in the late seventies, when the public exam results were released. I got the unpleasant news that I had failed my New Zealand School Certificate exams. Hurriedly, you sent me to off to the principal of St John's College to ask for me to repeat fifth form. I recall getting a ride on a punt to Rukuruku and walking the fifteen kilometre gravel road to Cawaci. Walking in pitch dark, my troubled mind overshadowed the blackness of the night. It was the longest fifteen kilometre walk of my life. I was agitated and full of self pity and regret. I only wished that I had worked harder earlier. Then I would not have had to walk the gravel road on that moonless night. It was a great relief to me when the principal agreed to my request to repeat a year. Consequently, the following year, I passed with good marks and proceeded on to do sixth form.

At school, I was always interested in becoming an army officer though Mum insisted that I became a teacher. Despite my selection to attend the Routine Officer Selection Board (ROSB) at the military camp, Mum's objection won the day. I had little choice and, in obedience, I enrolled in the three year programme at Corpus Christi Teachers Training College. In 1983, I completed the programme and graduated with my teacher qualification.

As a young, energetic and enthusiastic teacher at Convent School in the Gold mining town of Vatukoula, my early teaching days were full of excitement. I remember you and Mum visiting me. Those were great moments of happiness. Although your visits were short, they were always enjoyable and memorable. In the midst of the hype of living in a mining town and despite an exciting social life, I pursued my university studies through correspondence with the University of the South Pacific (USP). After seven years of teaching in Vatukoula I was awarded a Fijian Affairs scholarship for degree studies at USP. Sadly, mum passed away only two months before my graduation. It was regrettable that she did not live long enough to witness one of her wishes fulfilled and to share the joy of my achievement. At the graduation ceremony, I could not stop the tears from

my eyes as I walked down the aisle with my graduation gown on. Deep down in my being I could sense that a part of me – a tower of my strength – was not physically present on that momentous graduation day.

After my USP graduation in the early nineties, my academic journey took me on a new direction – to Lautoka Teachers College (LTC) where I was employed as a lecturer. It was this exposure to tertiary teaching at LTC that motivated me to paddle my academic canoe further across the seas. First to Canberra, and then to Wellington where I am now. I have been regularly confused and challenged by different currents and huge waves of uncertainty. At times I feel like throwing in the towel but the echo of your voice keeps reminding me to move on. When this happens, I am aware of your presence and the memory of your parting – “*tovolea, tovolea ko na qai rawata.*” Your words of wisdom had reminded the school community and the students that they needed to have courage, confidence and perseverance even if they failed. You assured everyone that failure was not the end but just a beginning; a new horizon for another pathway to be explored towards further achievement.

In closing this letter, I commend you and Mum for your patience and sacrifice as you communicated knowledge and guided me in my academic journey. I deeply miss the joy of your presence especially as I am now paddling the canoe of doctoral studies. This certainly is the terminal qualification of any academic journey and who would have thought that a lad who failed New Zealand School Certificate would be paddling this canoe now?

My dear Dad and Mum, you are warmly remembered every day of my life. I long to share with you the joys of my life and for you to see and cherish the fruits of your labour. In the meantime, shalom, my beloved parents, so long.



Dunn receiving certificate from Craig Hawk, NZAid Director (Pacific)



Leima and Dad at 2006 Graduation